



**File Code:** 1950/2210

**Date:** December 10, 2009

Dear Interested Party,

The Big Timber Ranger District of the Gallatin National Forest is currently seeking public comments regarding the upcoming analysis of grazing management on the West Bridger and Carey Gulch Allotments. These analyses are being conducted in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and are designed to inform the responsible official of the potential environmental consequences of continued livestock grazing on these allotments, as well as any changes in grazing practices that should be considered prior to issuing new permits. The timing of this NEPA analysis is consistent with Public Law 104-19.

## **Purpose and Need**

The purpose and need for the proposed action is to continue to allow livestock grazing on National Forest System (NFS) lands within these allotments in order to utilize the forage resource and provide opportunities for business ventures in livestock production. An adaptive management strategy as per Forest Service Handbook 2209.13 Chapter 90, effective 2005, is an integral part of the proposed action as a means to help correct any resource problems and improve rangeland conditions within the allotments.

## **Background**

Livestock grazing has been an important use of lands within and around the Gallatin National Forest since the 1800's. Grazing has been authorized since the formation of the Gallatin National Forest in the early 1900's and it continues to be an important part of our region's economy today.

The Gallatin Forest Plan (GFP) set goals and objectives for management of rangeland habitats and livestock grazing. Overall goals are to maintain or improve the forage resources and provide for livestock grazing (FP, p. II-1) within Forest Plan Standards. Standards were also set for grazing levels along streams and upland sites.

The analysis area for the project is located in the Main and West Bridger Creek and Deer Creek areas on the eastern edge of the Big Timber District, Gallatin National Forest, and is located approximately 20 miles southeast of Big Timber, Montana, (See attached vicinity map). These two allotments consist of 12 – 15 percent suitable primary grazing range and the remaining 85 – 87 percent is non-range, not used or not suitable for livestock. Information regarding the individual allotments can be found below.



## **West Bridger Allotment**

The West Bridger Allotment consists of approximately 20,589 acres (all National Forest system lands) in the area of Lower Deer Creek, West Bridger Creek and Derby Gulch. The allotment is located about 20 miles southeast of Big Timber, Montana, and may be accessed from the Iron Mountain Road or the West Bridger Road. The location and allotment boundary are shown on the attached map.

## **Carey Gulch Allotment**

The Carey Gulch allotment will be analyzed concurrently with the West Bridger Allotment. Carey Gulch is immediately east and adjacent to the West Bridger Allotment. The Carey Gulch allotment consists of approximately 2,870 acres of National Forest and 1,093 of private land and 80 acres of Bureau of Land Management lands, managed together as one grazing area. Access is by permission through private land up Carey Gulch, or through Forest Service land in Derby Gulch (which is more difficult).

Both West Bridger and Carey Gulch allotments were burned in the fall of 2006 in the Derby Fire. These two allotments are estimated to be approximately 90 percent burned with the exception of some of the riparian areas and north slopes. Most of the fences and livestock water developments were damaged or destroyed by the fire. The allotments were rested from grazing following the fire to protect soils and allow vegetation recovery. On the West Bridger Allotment, no grazing occurred in 2007, approximately 30 percent of the range was grazed in 2008 and full grazing resumed in 2009. Carey Gulch has not been grazed since the fire; however, the suitable range in the Carey Gulch Allotment is considered sufficiently recovered following the fire to allow grazing.

## **Proposed Action**

With implementation of the proposed action, permitted livestock grazing would continue under management designed to meet desired future conditions (DFC) that are consistent with Forest Plan standards. The proposed action focuses on DFC rather than specific seasons of use, permitted livestock numbers, or grazing rotations. This alternative is based on the principle of applying Adaptive Management Strategies (FSH 2209.13). Adaptive management is the process of utilizing monitoring data to determine if management changes are needed to improve resource conditions within allotments and, if so, what changes, and to what degree.

Adaptive management establishes the livestock grazing practices allowed (e.g., timing, intensity, frequency, duration), and the corresponding standards to be met. These standards are monitored over time to ensure that management actions and grazing practices are followed, and to determine if management adjustments are needed to meet DFC. Building adaptive management flexibility into allotment management allows for future administrative actions (e.g., changing grazing numbers and season, constructing new improvements, etc.), that adhere to the environmental assessment decision notice, to be implemented without additional analysis.

Under adaptive management, a strategy (e.g., grazing practices and management actions) to meet or move towards DFC objectives is identified. There is a starting point and successive management phases available to the authorized officer. If some aspects of the strategy are shown by monitoring not to be effective or cannot be implemented as planned, the authorized officer can then move to the next phase and/or implement specific actions from a phase. Each phase is implemented over time if monitoring indicates Forest Plan Standards and DFCs are not being met. In general, each successive phase corresponds to increasing levels of complexity, financial investment, and management intensity.

Desired Future Condition reflects the capability of the landscape, the various laws and regulations that apply to an area, and the values, or “products” that are desired. DFCs for the West Bridger and Carey Gulch Allotments were derived from utilizing a combination of Land and Resource Management Practices (LRMP) goals and objectives, standards derived from the Forest Plan regarding riparian vegetation utilization and streambank stability, the 2005 Region 1 “Standardized Protocol for Measuring Streambank Stability”, and the 2009 Gallatin National Forest “Managing Riparian Areas Relative to Grazing”, which provides a framework for determining existing condition, and short and long-term monitoring needs. More detailed descriptions of determining desired future conditions and developing use levels will be outlined in the EA, including a detailed discussion of individual stream conditions and riparian DFC determinations for all streams located within the allotment.

Generalized DFCs for streambank stability, riparian vegetation, and upland vegetation resource elements are described below:

- (a) **Streambanks:** Maintain all streams within the allotments in a proper functioning condition. The desired conditions are for adequate vegetation, landform, or large woody debris to be present to allow the stream and floodplain to function within its inherent range as determined by its landform and geologic context.
- (b) **Riparian Vegetation:** Desired conditions for riparian vegetation are for plant communities associated with springs and riparian areas to exhibit dominance of desired native sedges, grasses and forbs. Desired woody species are vigorous and reproducing successfully as demonstrated by an unaltered growth form and representation of all age classes. Riparian vegetation expands to the fullest extent possible.
- (c) **Upland Vegetation:** Maintain good to excellent upland vegetation condition through improved livestock distribution, proper utilization levels, and management of grass and forbs to decrease invasive weed species including spotted knapweed, musk thistle, Canada thistle, and houndstongue.

**Listed below are some preliminary opportunities for utilizing adaptive management strategies under consideration by the ID team:**

### **West Bridger Allotment**

The West Bridger Allotment would likely continue to be grazed at its current capacity. Currently conditions are thought to be meeting Forest Plan standards for upland and most riparian areas. Monitoring results would determine needs for future adjustment to management.

Possible changes that could occur within this allotment would be to lengthen several drift fences for better distribution of cattle and to rebuild water developments and fences destroyed in the Derby Fire.

### **Carey Gulch Allotment**

The Carey Gulch Allotment will likely continue to be grazed at the current capacity under the same type of Term/Off-on permit. The deferred grazing system that includes the private land would likely be continued. Currently the conditions on NFS lands are meeting Forest Plan Standards. Monitoring results would determine needs for future adjustment to management.

## **Public Involvement**

The first step in environmental analysis is to determine what needs to be analyzed. To do this, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) outlines a process termed "scoping" (refer to 40 CFR 1501.7). The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) defines scoping as "an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues related to a Proposed Action" (40 CFR 1501.7).

First, comments are obtained from interested and affected parties, both within and outside the agency, to develop potential issues that must be considered. Second, these "potential issues" are reviewed by the interdisciplinary team to determine: (a) the key issues to be analyzed in depth, and (b) issues that are not significant or that have been covered by prior environmental review and, therefore, should be eliminated from detailed study. After scoping is complete, documentation of the review of comments and potential issues will be compiled and will be located in the project file.

This letter is being mailed to individuals or groups who have indicated an interest in projects such as this on the Gallatin National Forest, current permittees, and to those who live in the immediate vicinity of the Project Area. Collaboration with the current permittees has and will continue to take place over the course of the development of the proposed action and alternatives.

## **Preliminary Issues**

A preliminary list of resource concerns to be considered includes the effects of grazing on:

- Vegetation
- Recreational Use
- Current Permittees
- Noxious Weeds
- Threatened and Endangered Species
- Sensitive Species
- Other Terrestrial Wildlife Species Including Big Game Winter Range
- Riparian Areas Including Fisheries
- Soils

Your comments will help determine if there are any significant issues associated with these resources, and will also help to identify any other issues that need to be addressed.

## **Decisions to Be Made**

Listed below are the decisions to be made in determining whether or not to reissue grazing permits on the various allotments and, if so, under what conditions:

- What are the management objectives and Desired Future Conditions for these allotments?
- What adaptive management actions and/or phases could be implemented to improve or maintain resource conditions?
- Which riparian and upland standards are appropriate to apply in the management of these allotments?
- What type and frequency of monitoring is adequate to determine resource conditions for each allotment?

Your comments will be used in our environmental analysis to help determine the scope of the issues to be addressed, the significance of issues relating to the proposed action, and to aid in the development of the proposed action and alternatives.

## Summary

I am asking you to review this proposal and submit any comments or concerns you may have concerning this project on the enclosed comment sheet. Please submit your written comments to Barb Ping, ID Team Leader, Bozeman Ranger District, 3710 Fallon St., Suite C, Bozeman MT 59718. You may also email comments to *bping@fs.fed.us*. **Comments must be submitted (postmarked) by January 11, 2010** in order to be considered.

For more information, please contact me (406) 932-5155, Sally Orr, Range Manager, Big Timber Ranger District (406) 932-5155 or Barbara Ping, ID Team Leader (406) 522-2558.

Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

/S/ BILL AVEY

BILL AVEY  
District Ranger

## **West Bridger / Carey Gulch Allotments EA**

**Comment Sheet on Proposals - Please return by January 11, 2010**

**Your name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Your address** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Are there additional issues or concerns specific to the proposed action?**

**Other comments on the Proposal:**

**Would you like to receive further correspondence on this project?**

**YES** \_\_\_\_

**NO** \_\_\_\_